

The Mega-Quake and My` Aha' Moment

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The Mega-Quake and My ‘Aha’ Moment

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Although there are a million and one far more harrowing stories about the 3-11 Great East Japan Earthquake, I would like to share my humble tale. I was in my 5th floor office with my TA when the quake struck. We ducked under my desk and huddled there hugging each other for a very long time, between hyperventilated breaths, “I’m Ok, *wheew, wheew*, are you OK.” “Yeah, I’m OK, *huff, huff*, how about you?” Then my TA’s words sent the most frightening chill up my spine: “This is it! This is THE ONE! The BIG one!” The thunder of the building shaking was so loud, I was totally unaware of the clatter of my floor-to-ceiling, wall-to-wall bookshelves dumping their entire wares onto the floor, knee high. Shuddering, I braced for the building to collapse, floor by floor (5th floor first) one on top of the other (like the towers on 9-11). Fortunately I wasn’t still in the 5th floor lady’s toilet, as I would be dead, crushed under concrete and steel girders when the roof crashed through. We darted out of there, crunching precious decades of my work underfoot to a snowy world outside. Thirty of us shivered there in shock, wondering what had happened, knowing only that we had become a part of history.

Later I walked to my mid-Showa Era room nearby and braved the four flights up to find the floor strewn with broken glass and bashed electrical appliances. The stench of splattered soy sauce wafted out. There was no water, no gas, no

electricity and no heating. I rushed out and found an evacuation center nearby where all of my neighbors ended up. While we had almost never spoken to each other before, we were now bonded like family, intimately crammed together, canned sardines head to foot, our bodies touching each other as we sleeplessly lay together, struggling to keep warm. All of us from different Tohoku University departments, donning white and yellow helmets, endured fierce after-quakes and got to know each other. There was a tsunami specialist and members from the Experimental Nuclear Radiation Department among us. We stayed 3 nights together in the shelter and during the days assembled in the room a radiation-expert, K-san, on the first floor of our building. We all began to take on the role of ‘hunter-gatherers’ in efforts to get basic supplies. We brought our defrosting food and remaining fuel supplies from our broken homes to the room of K-san who took on a leadership role deciding we should split up the tasks: “*yakuwari buntan*”. We somehow managed to prepare two hot meals daily for 15 of us.

A few weeks later, I put together a volunteer project with colleagues and students from Tohoku University, called “Tohoku Tsunami Revitalization Project”. In early April we joined efforts with a Kyoto group, helping them prepare fun foods for evacuees in the worst hit areas. Being there, seeing wreckage of people’s entire lives strewn everywhere, touching

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the space, breathing smells, feeling the vibrations and energy, and talking to survivors in those devastated areas is something forever deeply etched in my consciousness. In Kesennuma, people with intact houses had taken in families whose houses were washed away, and were living in cramped conditions with generators for electricity and a temporary out-house toilet. Everyone shared household tasks, not sparing children nor the elderly. After the foods were eaten, a Kyoto member cautiously started singing and playing guitar. Outdoors under the generator supplied lighting of evening, suddenly we saw the people begin to smile, laugh and sing. We had been careful to avoid sensitive issues, but as we were leaving, they opened their hearts and stories flowed out. One man had lost his son, still missing; others had lost homes, cars, and workplaces. The next day we went to Minami Sanriku Machi where children had gathered at a temporary Aozora School (temporary outdoor school). Within view of where they were enjoying cotton candy, down a steep hill I could see crushed homes and histories of entire lives laid strewn about. The children began to follow me as I ventured down the hill, but they abruptly stopped at the border of life and destruction, not daring to cross that taboo line.

This mega-quake experience gave me an '*aha moment*'. Even after living in Japan for half my life, this event triggered an incredible turning point in my understanding and connection to Japan and the people. In many ways I feel that the enigmatic unknown aspect of what makes Japanese people Japanese (and different from me fundamentally), had been revealed. I felt like I experienced 'being Japanese' through the quake. I have always embraced aspects of Japanese folk religion, which allows Shintoism and Buddhism and other worldviews to co-exist as the *Japanese Religion* (or spiritualism) which is highly influenced by nature

and its power. I feel that there are three aspects that Japanese people have deeply internalized and which have developed from the environment of Japan over millennia contributing to the creation of the Japanese spirit: 1) *the power of nature*; 2) *the vulnerability of man*; and 3) *the impermanence of life*. First of all, *the power of nature* in Japan is central to everyday life and a basic tenant of Shintoism and folk beliefs. Something that Westerners might perceive of as mere inanimate objects (a rock, a tree, a mountain, a waterfall) to the Japanese may represent concentrations of incredible natural power. Awed by its force and magnificence, these natural spots are sometimes taken as holy and worthy of shrines. The cycle of nature and movement of the seasons is a part of this nature and Japanese folk religion has had a long almanac tradition of seasonal rituals and ceremonies respecting the cycle of life, death and rebirth. Earthquakes, tsunami, typhoons, floods, fires, and other natural disasters occur regularly and ferociously constantly instilling the unpredictable and unceasing power of nature. Even after a huge once-in-a-thousand-year mega-quake, like 3-11, we all know that another disaster will occur again at any unannounced moment. This brings me to the next aspect: *the vulnerability of man*. Against this huge and powerful nature, man is so small and fragile. This is especially felt on the Japan archipelago with its extensive coastline. The third, and inter-related aspect, is *the impermanence of life*. This is epitomized in the historical attention given to cherry blossom viewing. It is not just the beauty of the spectacular full pinkness of the tree against a black trunk, or hundreds of trees, but the notion that this incredible splendor will fall to the ground and move on as the season cycles. So we have to stop, right at that moment, and enjoy the beauty to the fullest. Cherry blossoms are a symbol of life itself and the impermanence of our lives and our youth, as felt on 3-11.

After 3-11 an American friend wrote, saying she felt extremely angry with 'God' for allowing so many innocent people to die. But I think most Japanese don't feel *angry* with 'God'. Quite the contrary, they are *awed* by the power of 'God', or nature, as expressed by K-san: "I feel that what we have experienced is a gift from nature rather than punishment. I am very sorry for those who died and lost their loved ones; however, at least this was not due to war. We can and must accept what has happened and move on."

At the evacuation center on 3-11



At the evacuation center on 3-11.

